

Opening 1NT Bids

What is a balanced hand?

A balanced hand is a hand where you have roughly the same number of cards in each suit, so your hand may be suitable for NT. Specifically, a hand is balanced if it contains no voids or singletons, and at most one doubleton. The possible distributions for a balanced hand are 4333, 4432, and 5332.

What do I do as opener with a balanced hand?

When you have a balanced hand, your goal is to tell partner as quickly as possible that you have a balanced hand. You also want to describe your high card point (HCP) count within a small range. However, there are more possible point ranges than there are low-level NT bids, so you can't always solve this problem on the opening bid. Instead, you may have to start with something else, and then show your hand more precisely later.

What to do with a balanced hand and ____ HCP:

- 12-14:** Open 1 of a suit, then rebid NT.
- 15-17:** Open 1NT.
- 18-19:** Open 1 of a suit, then jump in NT.
- 20-21:** Open 2NT.
- 22-24:** Open 2♣,¹ then rebid 2NT.
- 25-26:** Open 3NT.
- 27-28:** Open 2♣, then rebid 3NT.

How do I respond when partner opens 1NT?

First of all, note that this only applies after partner opens 1NT. If partner opens 1 of a suit and rebids 1NT, there are different methods. However, an essentially identical structure applies after partner opens 2NT (or opens 2♣ and rebids 2NT, which is basically the same).

When responding to 1NT, the goal is to determine the level and strain (trump suit or NT) of the contract. To determine the proper level, add your HCP to partner's. As a general rule, you need 25 HCP to bid a game, 33 to bid a small slam, and 37 to bid a grand slam. Based on the 25 HCP rule, we divide responder's hands into three main categories after partner opens 1NT:

¹This does not say anything about clubs. It is a special bid which you use for all extremely strong hands.

0-7 HCP: A “sign-off” hand which wants to play in a partscore. Even if partner has 17 HCP, we do not have 25.

8-9 HCP: An “invitational” hand which may play partscore or game. If partner has 17 HCP, we have 25. If partner has 15 HCP, we do not.

10-15 HCP: A “game-forcing” hand which wants to play in a game, even if partner has only 15 HCP.

To determine the proper strain, you will try to find an 8-card major suit fit. If you have one, play in it. If you don’t have one, play in NT. It is very rare that you will want to play in a minor suit. For example, if you have a 4-card major, you want to know whether partner has 4 cards in that suit as well. The Stayman convention² allows you to ask.

Stayman

If you have an invitational or better hand (8+ HCP) and a 4-card major, you can bid $2\clubsuit$ to ask opener for a 4-card major. This bid says nothing about your clubs. Partner’s responses:

- $2\diamond$: I do not have a 4-card major.
- $2\heartsuit$: I have 4 hearts.
- $2\spadesuit$: I have 4 spades and not 4 hearts.

After opener gives the answer, you can now describe your point count. If partner did not bid your 4-card major, you can rebid 2NT (invitational) or 3NT (game-forcing). If partner bid your 4-card major, you can raise to the 3-level (invitational) or the 4-level (to play). After this, partner will have enough information to decide the final contract. If you bid a game, partner will usually pass (with one exception, mentioned in the next paragraph). If you made an invitational bid, partner will decide whether to play in partscore or in game based on his HCP count.

What if you open 1NT with both majors, and the auction goes 1NT- $2\clubsuit$ - $2\heartsuit$ -2/3NT? Your partner would not bid $2\clubsuit$ without a 4-card major, so you know that partner has spades, and therefore you can bid spades (at whatever level is appropriate).

Next we will see what you can do as responder when you do not have a hand appropriate for Stayman.

Old-Fashioned Style

This is an *extremely* simple style, which is sometimes taught to beginners. There are basically no serious players who play this way anymore. It is included here as motivation for the new style, and because it is still useful in competitive auctions (see last section). In this style, after partner opens 1NT, responder’s bids are:

²Named after Sam Stayman, who did not invent it

- Pass:** Not strong enough to invite game, and no desire to play \diamond , \heartsuit , or \spadesuit .
- 2 \clubsuit :** Stayman. See below.
- 2 \diamond / \heartsuit / \spadesuit :** To play: 0-7 HCP, at least 5 cards in the suit. Opener should pass.
- 2NT:** Invitational, 8-9 HCP with no 4-card major. Opener passes with a bad 1NT opener (15 HCP) and bids 3NT with a good 1NT opener (17 HCP).
- 3 \clubsuit / \diamond :** Like 3 \heartsuit / \spadesuit , except must have a very good reason to suggest a minor.
- 3 \heartsuit / \spadesuit :** Game-forcing with 5 cards in the suit. Opener bids 3NT with only 2 cards in the suit, and raises to 4 with 3 or more cards.
- 3NT:** To play, typically 10-15 HCP. Opener must pass.
- 4 \clubsuit :** Gerber.³
- 4 \diamond :** This space intentionally left blank.
- 4 \heartsuit / \spadesuit :** To play. Shows a good hand with at least 6 cards in the suit. Opener must pass.
- 4NT:** Invitational to slam, typically 16-17 HCP. Opener passes with a bad 1NT opener (15 HCP) and bids 6NT with a good 1NT opener (17 HCP).
- 5 \clubsuit / \diamond :** To play. Rare.
- 5NT:** Forcing to slam, invitational to grand slam. Typically 20-21 HCP. Opener bids 6NT with a bad hand and 7NT with a good hand.
- 6NT:** To play, 18-19 HCP. Opener must pass.
- 7NT:** To play, 22+ HCP. Opener must pass, as per the laws of bridge.

There are a few flaws with this style. The most obvious one arises when you have 8 points and a 5-card major. When you have 8 points, you are not sure whether you have enough points to bid game, so you should make an invitational bid, like 2NT, to ask whether partner has a good hand. However, there is no invitational bid available with a 5-card major. You can decide whether you want to show your major and guess how good partner's hand is, or make an invitational 2NT bid and hide your 5-card major.

³Beyond the scope of this class, but mentioned for completeness.

Transfers

A Jacoby transfer⁴ is a convention to describe your hand after partner opens 1NT and you have a 5-card major. Instead of bidding your suit, make the bid directly under your suit at the two level.⁵ (If you have hearts, bid 2♦. If you have spades, bid 2♥.) This commands partner to bid your major, which gives you more space to describe your hand. For example, after 1NT-2♥-2♠:

- Pass:** Desire to play 2♠. Same as old-fashioned auction 1NT-2♠.
- 2NT:** Invitational (8-9 HCP) with exactly 5 spades.
- 3♠:** Invitational with 6 or more spades.
- 3NT:** Game-forcing with exactly 5 spades. Same as old-fashioned 1NT-3♠.
- 4♠:** To play. Describes a game-forcing with 6 spades.

After this, partner has the information needed to decide the final contract. You will play spades or NT, depending whether you have an 8 card fit, and you will either play a partscore or a game, depending on your range and partner's.

As you can see, the transfer allows you to describe an invitational hand with a 5-card or longer major. Another, more subtle advantage is “siding” the contract. The transfer guarantees that the 1NT opener will become declarer. With the stronger hand declaring, the defenders can see fewer points in the dummy, so it is harder for them to defend.

The siding advantage is an important motivation behind another convention, the Texas transfer. What if you have a game-forcing hand with a 6-card major? In the old-fashioned style, you bid 4 of your major. Playing Texas transfers, you bid one step below 4 of your major,⁵ which tells partner to bid the contract for you. (If you agree to play Texas transfers, then you no longer need the auction 1NT-2♥-2♠-4♠ to show a game-forcing hand with 6 spades, because you have the auction 1NT-4♥-4♠ instead. We instead use the slower auction to show a hand with long spades and slam interest. The same applies if your suit is hearts. Don't worry too much about remembering this. It's a more advanced topic than the rest of this class.)

Let's see how this all fits together in the modern bidding style:

Modern Style

- Pass:** Not strong enough to invite game, and no desire to play ♥ or ♠.
- 2♣:** Stayman.
- 2♦:** Jacoby transfer, showing 5 or more hearts, any strength.

⁴Named after Oswald Jacoby, who did invent it

⁵If you are playing in a club or tournament, your partner must say “Transfer” when you do this, because your opponents have a right to know what your bids mean.

- 2♥: Jacoby transfer, showing 5 or more spades, any strength.
- 2♠: This space intentionally left blank.
- 2NT: Invitational, typically 8-9 HCP.
- 3♣/♦: Game-forcing hand with a long suit.
- 3♥/♠: This space intentionally left blank
- 3NT: To play, typically 10-15 HCP. Opener must pass.
- 4♣: Gerber.
- 4♦: Texas transfer, showing a good hand with at least 6 hearts.
- 4♥: Texas transfer, showing a good hand with at least 6 spades.
- 4♠: This space intentionally left blank.

Higher bids are the same as in the old-fashioned style.

What if the opponents interfere?

This section is more advanced than the rest of the lesson. It is included partly for completeness, and partly to justify why it is still good to know the old-fashioned style.

Playing Jacoby transfers, you have an obvious problem if the opponents interfere. If partner opens 1NT and your right hand opponent (RHO) overcalls 2♦, how do you show a 5-card heart suit? Some people use a convention called “mirror doubles” or “stolen-bid” doubles, in which a double of the opponent’s bid means whatever it would mean if you had bid it yourself. In this situation, a double of 2♦ would be a transfer to hearts. This is a popular convention among bad players.

A better idea is to revert to the old-fashioned style. The one exception is that you can still use Texas transfers, because the opponent’s overcall probably didn’t interfere with the 4 level. In our example auction, you can bid 2♥ if your hand is weak, and 3♥ if your hand is game-forcing. Once again, if your hand is invitational, you’ll just have to guess. (Interference works.) If you want to bid Stayman, you can bid the opponent’s suit: for example, 1NT-(2♦)-3♦ asks partner to show a 4-card major. This is our first example of a very useful concept: the cuebid. A cuebid is a bid of a suit that you can’t possibly want to play in. In this situation, you don’t want to play in RHO’s suit, so we give that bid a useful meaning instead. If you actually have good cards in the opponent’s suit, you can double for penalty. This says that you don’t think the opponents can make their contract; it doubles the score for them if they make it, but doubles the score for you if they don’t. When partner opens 1NT, you have a very good idea of what opener’s hand looks like, so it is a good opportunity to make a penalty double when you are strong in the opponent’s suit. This is one of the reasons why mirror doubles are a bad convention.

There are other, more complicated methods you can learn for dealing with an opponent's overcall, which allow you to describe more hand types. For example, you can get back your invitational major suit bids, and tell partner whether you have a stopper in the opponent's suit. (Stopper = high card which will prevent them from taking the first, say, 5 tricks in their suit. You don't want to bid 3NT when overcaller has AKQJ10 of his suit.) However, those conventions are far beyond the scope of a beginner class.